

# Role of Stimming, Structure, and Self-Regulation in the Lives of Autistic Individuals

Bellinie Heipon\*

Department of Medicine, Harvard University, Massachusetts, USA

## DESCRIPTION

Repetitive behaviours are one of the hallmark characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), often appearing early in a child's development and persisting in various forms throughout life. These behaviours, also known as "stimming" (short for self-stimulatory behaviours), can include hand-flapping, rocking, lining up objects, repeating words or phrases (echolalia), or following rigid routines. While these behaviours are frequently viewed as unusual or disruptive by others, within the context of autism, they can serve a wide range of functions that are essential to the individual's well-being.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) includes repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities as a core criterion for autism diagnosis. These behaviours are often divided into two main categories: motor movements (such as spinning or hand movements) and insistence on sameness (such as strict adherence to routines or extreme distress at small changes). Additionally, highly focused interests and sensory sensitivities—both of which can lead to repetitive engagement—are commonly observed in autistic individuals.

From a neurological and developmental perspective, repetitive behaviours may be linked to how autistic brains process sensory information. For some, stimming helps regulate overwhelming sensory input or provides comfort in unfamiliar or stressful situations. A child who flaps their hands when excited or rocks when anxious may be using these movements to self-soothe or express emotion in a way that feels natural and necessary. In this light, repetitive behaviours can be coping mechanisms rather than symptoms that require elimination.

However, the expression of these behaviours can vary widely. Some are harmless or even beneficial, while others may interfere with learning, communication, or safety. For instance, a child who becomes so fixated on a specific toy or activity that they cannot engage in other tasks may struggle to participate in school or social interactions. In more intense cases, repetitive

behaviours can become self-injurious, such as head-banging or biting, requiring careful clinical attention and support.

One of the key challenges in understanding repetitive behaviours is the way they are interpreted by those outside the autism community. Historically, such behaviours were viewed as purposeless or problematic, leading to attempts to suppress them through behavior modification techniques. While certain interventions, such as Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), have aimed to reduce these behaviours to improve "functionality," there is growing debate about whether such approaches respect the autistic person's needs and autonomy.

The neurodiversity movement has contributed significantly to reshaping how repetitive behaviours are perceived. Many autistic self-advocates argue that stimming is a natural and necessary expression, not something to be "trained out." They emphasize that the goal should not be to make autistic individuals appear neurotypical, but to support them in ways that enhance quality of life without erasing identity. This includes creating environments that reduce sensory overload, offering alternative ways to express emotion, and encouraging acceptance of behaviours that may look different but are not harmful.

Professionals and caregivers are increasingly encouraged to take a person-centered approach—recognizing which behaviours are helpful and which ones may signal distress. Rather than focusing solely on reducing repetitive actions, the emphasis is shifting toward understanding their purpose and function in each individual's life. When repetitive behaviours are interfering with development or causing harm, intervention should be compassionate and collaborative, rooted in respect for the individual's dignity.

## CONCLUSION

Repetitive behaviours in autism are far more than clinical symptoms—they are deeply personal expressions that reflect how autistic individuals experience, respond to, and interact with the world. By moving beyond a framework of correction and toward one of understanding, society can foster greater inclusion,

**Correspondence to:** Bellinie Heipon, Department of Medicine, Harvard University, Massachusetts, USA, E-mail: Heiponbelli56@gmail.com

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respect, and support for those on the spectrum. Recognizing the purpose behind these behaviours is not only crucial to effective

support but also central to embracing neurodiversity in its fullest sense.